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Exclusivists contend that specific doctrines, such as Christian doctrines, are true and those incompatible with them are false. In "Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism" Alvin Plantinga defends religious exclusivism from a variety of objections. In this paper I discuss one of those objections. Plantinga agrees, at least for the sake of argument, that those in other religious traditions have evidence for their beliefs comparable to his evidence for his beliefs. Some critics contend that in maintaining their beliefs in the light of this fact about equality of evidence, exclusivists are not treating like cases alike. The critics think that if you know that someone else's evidence for their belief is just as good as your evidence for your incompatible belief, then you are not reasonable in retaining your belief. I argue, in opposition to Plantinga, that a version of this principle is correct.

In "Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism" Alvin Plantinga defends religious exclusivism from a variety of objections.[1] A religious exclusivist, according to Plantinga, believes that "the tenets or some of the tenets of one religion–Christianity, let's say–are in fact true; he adds, naturally enough, that any propositions, including other religious beliefs, that are incompatible with those tenets are false."(p. 174) Exclusivism is not merely an application to religious matters of the innocuous doctrine that if the tenets of one body of thought are true, tenets that are incompatible with those truths are false. Religious exclusivists say something more controversial than that. They contend that specific doctrines, such as Christian doctrines, are true and those incompatible with them are false. If they say what they believe, they say to believers in other religions, "My beliefs are true and yours are false" or, in more contentious language, "We are right and you are wrong."

Pluralists argue that it "is irrational, or egotistical and unjustified, or intellectually arrogant, or elitist, or a manifestation of harmful pride, or even oppressive and imperialistic" to maintain that one's own beliefs are true and the beliefs of others are false once one becomes aware of the variety of religious beliefs held by sensible and intelligent people around the world.(p. 174) Plantinga's replies to most of these charges are, in my view, entirely satisfactory. Exclusivists, simply in virtue of being exclusivists, have none of these moral flaws. And many of the epistemological charges are baseless as well. However, I believe that Plantinga does not deal satis-

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factorily with an issue concerning the justification of belief when one knows that others have equally well supported competing beliefs. This issue will be the focus of this paper.

Plantinga, and others who share his beliefs, have a variety of experiences, other beliefs, and perhaps other internal markers that constitute their reasons, or their evidence, for their beliefs. But, the pluralist contends, other people with radically different beliefs have comparable internal markers that equally well support their beliefs. Plantinga writes:

> Let's agree for purposes of argument that these beliefs are on an epistemic par in the sense that those of a different religious tradition have the same sort of internally available markers–evidence, phenomenology, and the like–for their beliefs as I have for [mine].(p. 181)

In what follows I will take Plantinga to be agreeing that he knows, or at least is justified in believing, that those in other traditions have internal markers comparable to his. A weaker concession would be that it is possible that others have comparable internal markers. The stronger concession does seem to be called for, given the relevant similarities among people in various religious traditions.

The pluralist critics think that once one is aware of this parity of evidence one is unreasonable in maintaining one's original beliefs. Roughly, they contend that exclusivists are not treating like cases alike. The critics think that if your evidence for your belief is just as good as my evidence for my incompatible belief, and I know that you have this comparable evidence, then I'm not reasonable in claiming that I am right and you are wrong.

I think that some version of the principle pluralists appeal to is correct. But the details of its formulation matter. Here is one way to spell out precisely a principle about treating like cases alike:

> A. If (i) S has some good reasons ("internal markers") to believe P, but (ii) also knows that other people have equally good reasons ("internal markers") for believing things incompatible with P, then S is not justified in believing P.

For others to have "equally good reasons,"as required by clause (ii), is for them to have reasons that justify their beliefs just as much as S's original reasons justify S's belief. In the situation under discussion, S has some initial evidence supporting P, as well as information about the other people's evidence. But the information about the others is not counted as part of S's reasons for P in making the calculation of evidential parity. If the information about the beliefs of others were included in the calculation of the quality of S's reasons in clause (i), then (A) would be trivially false. For, according to (ii), the others do have good reasons to believe things incompatible with P. Hence, if S's overall reasons to believe P are as good as the others' overall reasons to believe things incompatible with P, then S does have overall good reasons to believe P, and is justified in believing P. The idea behind (A) is rather that S's reasons for P, independent of S's information about others, is comparable to their evidence for their competing beliefs.

An example, to be discussed below, will make this point clearer.

Condition (i) describes the situation Plantinga thinks he is in with respect to his own beliefs. Condition (ii) describes my understanding of what Plantinga is willing to concede, at least for the purposes of the present discussion. That is, he has his reasons, and he knows that others have their comparable reasons. That he knows about these competing reasons is crucial. Just to know that others believe differently, without knowing or having reason to think that they have good reason for so believing, is not enough to undermine one's belief. To know that they have equally good reason to believe differently is more troublesome. If (A) is true, Plantinga's beliefs are not justified. But Plantinga would reject (A), and he describes some cases that might be used to show this. I will discuss these examples below. However, I agree that (A) is false. I will present my own example to show this and then present a principle superior to (A) that may also do the job the pluralist critic of exclusivism wants done.

Suppose a medical researcher does a careful study to examine the effectiveness of drugs A, B, C, and D for treating some disease. The study indicates that A works best. Suppose that at first this is all the information she has relevant to the issue. At this point, we can assume, she is reasonably well justified in thinking that A works best.[2] Suppose further that three other researchers have done similar studies, and one study indicated that B works best, another that C works best, and the last that D works best. No researcher knows about any study other than his or her own. At this point, each of them has reasons good enough to justify believing that the drug that did best in his or her own study is in fact most effective. (If it matters, assume that none of them is in any way negligent for not knowing about the conflicting results.) Condition (ii) of (A) is not yet satisfied, for our researcher does not know about these other results, as (ii) requires. But now suppose that she learns about all the other results. It will keep matters slightly simpler if we also assume that she knows that none of the others have learned about the variety of results. Now the conditions in clause (ii) are satisfied. She has her reasons and she knows that they have their comparable reasons.

If we can add conditions to this story that make her justified in thinking that she's right and the others are wrong, then we will have a counterexample to (A). It is not difficult to do so. Suppose that she also knows about flaws in the studies the other researchers have done, flaws that they have no way of knowing about and do not involve errors of reasoning. The fact that the others have no way of knowing about the flaws and have not made errors of reasoning makes it true that they are still justified in their own beliefs. The fact that she has found these flaws shows that she does have reason to discount their results and to believe that she's right and they are wrong. We thus have a counterexample to (A). It turns on the fact that she knows more than they do. She is able to explain away their conflicting results. Thus, you can have good reasons for your belief, know that other people have equally good reasons for their competing belief, and still be justified in retaining your own. (A) is false.[3]

But now consider a variation on the case. Suppose instead of uncovering flaws in the other studies, our researcher has no reason at all to think that the other studies are inferior to hers. If, in this situation, she continues to

believe that A works best she would be unjustified. She is giving special status to her own study with no reason to do so, and this is an epistemic error. This really is a failure to treat like cases alike. She knows that there are four bodies of equally good evidence for incompatible propositions, and she is favoring the one that happens to have been hers originally. The pluralist critic of exclusivism thinks that exclusivists who know about the beliefs of others are making a similar error. The principle here is the following:

> B. If (i) S has some good reasons ("internal markers") to believe P, but (ii) also knows that other people have equally good reasons ("internal markers") for believing things incompatible with P, and (iii) S has no reason to discount their reasons and favor her own, then S is not justified in believing P.

I think that (B) is correct. In effect, when conditions (ii) and (iii) are satisfied one has an internal marker that undercuts P for S. It does not show that P is false, but it does undermine her justification for P.

Plantinga may object to (B). He says that the exclusivist

> doesn't really think the beliefs in question *are* on a relevant epistemic par. She may agree that she and those who dissent are equally convinced of the truth of their belief, and even they that they are internally on a par, that the internally available markers are similar, or relevantly similar. But she must still think that there is an important epistemic difference: she thinks that somehow the other person has made a mistake, or has a blind spot, or hasn't been wholly attentive, or hasn't received some grace she has, or is in some way epistemically less fortunate.(p. 182)

Let us call the factors to which Plantinga calls attention here "external epistemic factors." Notice what Plantinga says here: the exclusivist *will* (or must) think that the other person has made a mistake or has a blind spot, or is epistemically less well off in virtue of some other external epistemic factor. This is to say that the exclusivist *will* discount the other person's reasons and favor her own. That may be true. But the pluralist critic thinks that what the exclusivist will do is not crucial here. What matters is whether the exclusivist has a reason to do this. That's the significance of clause (iii) of principle (B). I don't think Plantinga has argued that he does have a reason to discount the equally well supported rival views. In contrast, in the version of the example about the medical researcher in which she knows about the flaws in the other studies, she does have reason to think that the other researchers have gone wrong because of an external epistemic factor. Thus, I claim that the pluralist complaint about exclusivists of the sort under discussion here is that their beliefs are unjustified since principle (B) is true and (i), (ii), and (iii) are all satisfied.

There are, of course, possible replies available to Plantinga. He may retract what he conceded for the sake of argument and contend that he does have reason to think that his internal markers are better than those of people with beliefs other than his own, so that clause (ii) of (B) is not satis-

fied in the case of exclusivists such as him. He may argue that he does have reason to think that there is some external epistemic difference between himself and people with differing views, such as the others having a blind spot, so that clause (iii) is not satisfied. These replies involve substantive disputes about the actual epistemic circumstances of various religious beliefs, and that is well beyond anything I can address in this note.

Plantinga may contend that (B) is false. I suspect he would argue that his examples illustrate this. One example involves his belief that racial bigotry is despicable. He grants that others with conflicting beliefs may have internal markers on a par with Plantinga's own. Plantinga thinks that he (Plantinga) is nevertheless justified in his belief.(p. 182) But I doubt that there are specifications of the story about the bigot in which both conditions (ii) and (iii) of (B) are satisfied. In some versions of the story, those who favor bigotry do not have internal states on a par with Plantinga's. They may feel as strongly as he does, but I suspect that there is some sort of incoherence in their view or it requires an unjustified ad hoc acceptance of exceptions to general principles they endorse. (That's what makes it bigotry.) So (ii) is not satisfied. And if you fill out a story in which the bigot has no internal defect of this sort, I suspect that you will end up telling a story in which (iii) is not satisfied and Plantinga will have reason to think that they have a blind spot or some other defect. Plantinga will then be in a position relevantly like the medical researcher who knows of the flaws in the rival studies.

Plantinga's second example concerns belief in an abstract metaphysical doctrine, Serious Actualism. The details of this view do not matter for present purposes. He thinks that other philosophers who accept rival metaphysical views may have internal markers on a par with his own. Here I'm inclined to think that conditions (i) - (iii) of (B) are satisfied and to accept the implications of (B): it is unreasonable to accept such metaphysical doctrines under these conditions. Even moderately well justified beliefs about deep metaphysical matters are hard to come by. The fact that other people, as intelligent and well-informed as us, sincerely disagree with us gives us reason to doubt what initially (and perhaps still) seems correct to us. We are justified in persisting in our beliefs in such cases only if we have reason to think that their internal markers are inferior or that some external epistemic factor explains their false belief.

Even if (B) is not exactly right, it seems to me clear that the medical researcher is unjustified when she continues to believe in her own account while having no reason at all to discount the equally good reasons she knows others have for their rival accounts. The pluralist charge is that some religious exclusivists can run afoul of the same principle, whether that is (B) or some slight variation. Whether this charge applies to actual exclusivists depends, of course, on whether they know about the epistemic situations of people in other religious traditions. That is, it depends upon whether they satisfy the conditions in clauses (ii) and (iii) of (B).

A final note: Plantinga says that being in a position something like the one the pluralist objects to is "wholly unavoidable, given our human condition."(p. 174) He applies this point to the issue under discussion here by arguing that a pluralist, in endorsing a principle such as (B), is endorsing a

principle that he knows others reject, and "for all he knows, that belief (i.e., the denial of (B)) has internal parity with his."(p. 182) Thus, in endorsing (B), the pluralist has a belief that is unjustified if (B) is true. Thus, if (B) is true, the objection relies on an unjustified premise. And if (B) is false, it relies on a false premise. Either way, the objection fails.[4] But I simply do not see why this should be granted. Pluralists may have reason to think that some people, such as Plantinga, do reject (B). However, as we've just seen, the available counterexamples to (B) are unsuccessful. Pluralists who realize this therefore have reason to think that those who deny (B) either do not have good reasons for that rejection or that some external epistemic factor is leading them astray.[5]

University of Rochester

NOTES

1. In *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity* edited by Philip L. Quinn and Kevin Meeker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 172-192.

2. I am not assuming that the belief is well enough justified to meet a justification condition for knowledge. It has some lesser, but positive, epistemic status.

3. It is worth noting that the evidence for the flaws in the competing studies is not evidence that drug A is effective. It is, rather, evidence that serves to undermine a defeater for this proposition. The defeater is the original information about the other studies.

4. Notice that (B) includes the condition that S have reason to believe that the others' reasons for their contrary beliefs are as good as S's own reasons. In the passage quoted in this paragraph, Plantinga says only that "for all [the pluralist] knows," others have equally good reasons for rejecting (B). But for pluralists' belief in (B) is unjustified according to (B) only if they meet the more stringent condition actually mentioned in (B).

5. I am grateful to John Bennett and Todd Long for helpful discussions of drafts of this paper.